

Review of *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* by Thy Phu (Duke University Press)

by Collin Hawley | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* draws on archives of the Vietnam War that center Vietnamese perspectives to complicate the historical and contemporary visual representation of Vietnamese identities that have been filtered through the Western narrative of the Vietnam War. Her book emphasizes the significance of typically denigrated visual materials including propaganda and vernacular photographs. She focuses on the complex deployment and reception of photographic objects as politicized symbols, sources of memorialization, and identity formation.

KEYWORDS postcolonialism, history, memory, war, diaspora, photography, identity, archive, visual culture

Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam. By Thy Phu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 248 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1075-3. US List: \$25.95.

The most well-known photographs of the Vietnam War are images of spectacular brutality and suffering. Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* examines an alternative, often quotidian archive that challenges these violent visions of the Vietnam War and Vietnam generally. Her effort is to expand the category of war photography beyond representations of spectacularized violence. To better understand Vietnam, she weaves together a variety of lesser known and private photographs that exemplify the eponymous, contradictory "warring visions."

In chapter 1, Phu deftly historicizes the complex history and use of photography as a tool for the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. She centers the chapter on the mythology of socialist Vietnamese photographers. She explains that during the war, cameras and film were in short supply, as this equipment could only be sourced from Vietnamese allies (East Germany and the USSR) or "liberated" from Western adversaries (41). She tells stories of photographers traveling for weeks or months to capture a single battle, swimming while

holding their gear above the water, sneaking through dangerous territory, and developing and printing photographs in an underground darkroom with water scavenged from puddles in bomb craters. The tenor of these anecdotes is one of tenacity and adaptation. Accordingly, the stylistic ethos of socialist visual culture is one of recycling and resourcefulness. The second key element of this chapter is the use of photographic manipulation. Vietnamese photographers on both sides of the war have garnered controversy through manipulating images. Manipulation is often represented as the antithesis of documentary photojournalism, propaganda. However, citing the work of Mathew Brady, Phu emphasizes that manipulation is historically central to war photography. Phu also explains that the label of propaganda dissolves the possibility of useful critique. Instead, propagandistic work deserves to be analyzed seriously rather than oversimplified because it nevertheless figures into forming "ways of seeing" (17). The mythologization of socialist photographers functioned as a tool to create a clear national image of socialist Vietnam. Phu, through her measured analysis of these myths and photographic manipulation, emphasizes how photography is deployed to construct these ways of seeing and politically efficacious narratives.

Chapter 2 explores the multifarious deployment of the Vietnamese revolutionary woman as a symbol. During the war, this symbol was taken up by a variety of groups, including both the North and South Vietnamese governments and various anti-war feminist groups in the West. Each group had conflicting purposes that did not adhere to the intentions of the revolutionaries themselves. Phu explains that this misrecognition and the concomitant "friction" was nonetheless productive in developing and cementing socialist ways of seeing. Furthermore, she explains that the symbolization/objectification of Vietnamese women does not necessarily diminish their actual efforts in the war but simultaneously represents "a pivotal tactic for asserting cultural influence" (89). Solidarity among anti-war groups was established around the visual motif of motherhood. She begins the chapter by contrasting the visual presentation of two prominent Vietnamese revolutionary women, Madame Binh from the North and Madame Nhu from the South. Madame Nhu's self-presentation was militarized, centered on the all-female militia that she established. On the other hand, Madame Binh self-consciously displayed traditional, gentle femininity. The enduring image of the Vietnamese woman revolutionary is the image cultivated by Madame Binh and the socialist Vietnamese Women's Union. Phu concludes the chapter by exploring the contradictory solidarity established between various anti-war groups across the globe and the revolutionaries in Vietnam. Though the Western anti-war women's groups advocated for peace through pacifism instead of peace through struggle, they united around the Vietnamese woman revolutionary as a maternal symbol: "Madame Binh tenderly wrapped the message of military necessity in the soothing folds of maternity" (110). For Phu, this textual mediation and re-articulation explains how pacifist movements justified their use of the fiercely militant imagery of Vietnamese women.

In chapter 3, Phu analyzes the practice of war reenactment. The object at the center of the chapter is a photo book by An-My Lê that captured a reenactment of the Vietnam War in Virginia entitled *Small Wars*. The practice of war reenactment and the images that are made around the events represent another expansion of war photography's "warring visions" into the realm of speculative and revisionist history. Furthermore, contrary to typical war reenactments, which are primarily composed of white participants, Vietnam War reenactments often attract participants of color. Phu explains that the indexical medium of photography shapes the practice of memorialization: "Photographs activate memory—photographs of reenactments encode multiple temporalities, the past and the present, an imagined past that is experienced as "real"—and map out palimpsestic spaces" (137). She juxtaposes reenactment photography's amalgamation of imagination and history alongside the persistent debate around what constitutes an authentic visual representation of war. She argues that the practice of war reenactments exemplifies the importance of staged and manipulated photographs to the memorialization of the Vietnam War and the development of diasporic Vietnamese identity. She explains that these photographs prompt an "infinite series of further encounters" that serve to construct and reinforce the complex and contradictory identities and histories established around the object of the Vietnam War (123).

Chapter 4 explores the role of both present and absent family photographs in the development of Vietnamese diasporic identity. Phu continues her expansion of definitions in this chapter by interrogating the flexibility of family photographs. She describes the familial appropriation of photographs intended for instrumental uses. The refugee identification photograph, intended as a tool for state surveillance, is a photograph often included in diasporic Vietnamese photo albums including her own. She also expands the category of family photographs to include missing or destroyed photographs, as many refugee families lost or destroyed their albums. The family album represents a reclamation of identity from a variety of sources: public, private, material, and immaterial. The latter half of the chapter takes on disconnected, dissolved, and "orphaned" family photographs that are often found in antique stores in Vietnam. She closely analyzes the album of a soldier commemorating his military education and friendships that she discovered in one such store. This album obviously stretches the definition of "family"; however, Phu explains that these banal fraternal photographs represent warring visions that subvert spectacular representations of the Vietnam War. She closes the chapter by discussing the bricolage "orphan" photograph installations of a Vietnamese artist, Dinh Q. Lê. He weaves together family photographs discovered in antique stores into semi-transparent curtains, boxes, and other objects that emphasize the immensity of what has been lost. Simultaneously, he created a digital archive of the images that prompts viewers to identify any that they recognize. She emphasizes the exhibit's work to reconnect to a vanished history. The family photograph usefully expands the narrative of the Vietnam War beyond

spectacularized violence to quotidian, human, and most crucially, Vietnamese stories of persistence and survival.

Phu's *Warring Visions* is an effective examination of the multifarious ways that the tool of photography signifies. She urges her readers to reexamine one of the most visually saturated wars apart from the Western, dominant lens. Rejecting the pessimism of Sontag and other photography critics, she mines the deep complexity of her archive to create nuanced, plural narratives of Vietnam. *Warring Visions* is valuable for anyone interested in visual culture, archival studies, and diasporic identity against the grain of Western visions of imperialism.

Author Information



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Collin Hawley holds a Bachelor of Arts in photography and film studies as well as a Master of Arts in humanities with a concentration in cultural studies from Milligan University in Johnson City, TN. His research draws heavily from his practical experience with analog photography and examines the intersection of vision, power, gender, sexuality, and subject formation through visual technologies. Currently he is a doctoral student in George Mason's cultural studies program.

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